

Nicaragua

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Freedom of the Press

In 2013, President Daniel Ortega and his Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) maintained restrictive media policies that have been in place since the party took power in 2007, including preferential treatment for the progovernment press and denial of official advertising worth millions of dollars to independent and opposition outlets.

While the constitution provides for freedom of the press, in practice the government places constraints on the media's ability to inform the public. Defamation and libel remain criminalized, with violations punishable by substantial fines. While the number of legal cases against the press has decreased, the drop has largely stemmed from self-censorship among journalists who fear economic and physical reprisals for critical reporting. Judges are often aligned with political parties; although there were no reported cases of judicial intimidation in 2013, the pattern of judicial partisanship showed no signs of change. Some courts have barred journalists from covering certain stories. In May 2013, police ejected Martha Vásquez and Manuel Esquivel of the leading independent newspaper *La Prensa* from a politically sensitive hearing at the Central Judicial Complex even though they possessed the relevant credentials.

A 2007 law established the right to access public information and modernized government websites, but information on government activities remains difficult to obtain. The Ortega administration is highly secretive. The politically powerful first lady, Rosario Murillo, presides over an unofficial council that acts as a clearinghouse for government information and routinely denies journalists' requests. Journalists who are loyal to the ruling party receive favorable treatment, including exclusive access to government events and press briefings, at which officials typically take no questions. In addition, the administration exploits a law—intended to facilitate the delivery of emergency messages—that allows the government to interrupt regular programming and broadcast official statements.

In 2013, media organizations continued to report threats, harassment, and physical violence against their employees and installations, carried out by both government and private actors. In May, Agence France-Presse photojournalist Hector Retamal was arrested, held incommunicado for several days, and deported for several alleged migration and security violations. In October, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, director of the online newsmagazine *Confidencial* and the television program *Esta Semana*, published a letter describing a pattern of harassment and intimidation aimed at one of the magazine's investigative journalists, Ismael López Ocampo, who had reported on armed antigovernment groups in northern Nicaragua. In November, police detained a reporting team from *La Prensa* for two hours after it took photographs of a house confiscated from drug traffickers and allegedly transferred to a government associate.

There are more than 100 radio stations, which serve as the population's main source of news. Print media offer diverse political opinions, with several daily papers presenting both progovernment and critical perspectives. Newspaper ownership was traditionally concentrated in the hands of various factions of the Chamorro family, though its influence has declined somewhat in recent years. Television is dominated by two ownership groups that control eight of the nine free-to-air stations and are generally considered to be aligned with the ruling FSLN. Mexican media mogul Ángel González controls four channels, which garner high ratings by prioritizing entertainment and light news over public debate or investigative journalism. The other television conglomerate is controlled by the president's family, which owns three channels and controls the public Channel 6. The Communications Research Center of Nicaragua reported in 2013 that

those channels were increasingly used to disseminate government propaganda. The ruling party also owns Radio Ya, Radio Sandino, Radio La Primerísima, and Radio Nicaragua, while the president or the FSLN controls news websites such as *El 19 Digital* and *Nicaragua Triunfa*.

Newspaper owners and press freedom organizations continue to decry enforcement of the so-called Arce Law, which imposes high tariffs on imported printing materials such as ink and paper, stifling independent journalism. The administration also influences media content by steering its substantial official publicity budget toward the Ortega family's holdings or other compliant outlets. Media outlets' insecurity is exacerbated by the ongoing legislative review of the General Law on Telecommunications, which has prevented the issuance of new broadcasting licenses since the review began in 2008.

There are no government restrictions on the internet, although civil society groups have complained of unlawful government monitoring of e-mail. The internet was accessed by nearly 16 percent of the population in 2013. Although the penetration rate remains relatively low, the internet has had a significant impact on the media landscape. The number of users of social-networking sites has increased in recent years, and many Nicaraguans are now using the internet as a primary source of news.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Partly Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

52

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

14

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

21

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

17